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America has a right of any Libyan-CIA

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Editor of The Inquirer

In July 1977, 10 American men, believing they were involved in a covert operation authorized by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, traveled to Libya where they were informed they were to give commando training to terrorists.

Nine were retired Green Berets, the elite commando element of the Army Special Forces. They had been recruited and were led by Master Sgt. Luke Thompson, a Green Beret on active duty, who had been solicited to organize the group by a former CIA agent.

Bits of information about the mission have been coming to the surface since its paymaster and apparent director, Edwin P. Wilson, and an aide, Francis Terpil, both former CIA agents, were indicted in April 1980 by a District of Columbia grand jury on charges of illegally exporting explosives, acting as unregistered agents for Libya and conspiring to murder a Libyan defector in Egypt.

Last week, the New York Times, in an article by reporters Philip Taubman and Jeff Gerth, published fresh details about the mission — enough to cause the CIA to disavow any "official encouragement or involvement" in Wilson's dealings with Libya, but its spokesman did not comment directly on the Times account.

I'm not one to poke at dark shadows, but The Times article and the CIA response has left me with an uneasy feeling.

Was the Green Beret training mission the result of money-making machinations by two ex-CIA agents who had "gone sour," as one retired high U.S. intelligence official asserted?

Or could the CIA have authorized it for reasons that only can be speculated upon — scenarios that could range from a covert infiltration of the Libyan intelligence establishment to learn about its terrorist activities and possibly influence Libyan conduct to a darker effort to gain favor with Libya's fanatical dictator, Col. Moammar Khadafy?

One thing is virtually certain: The Green Beret team could not have gone to Libya or operated long there without high officials of the Carter administration knowing about it. How high is a question that has not been answered publicly, but Thompson, now retired, told the Times and other reporters that he alerted Army counterintelligence officers at Fort Bragg after tentatively accepting the assignment from Wilson's emissary although he did not know then that his destination was Libya.

Thompson said the counterintelligence officers told him to "keep cooperating" and quoted them as saying:

"We've checked this to the top and its legal and aboveboard. You can pursue it as you desire."

That statement is ambiguous. How high "the top" was, as far as the counterintelligence officers were concerned, is not known. The statement could mean that they had checked with their superiors and, finding there was no law prohibiting the mission, so informed Thompson.

What Thompson took it to mean, he said, was that the mission had official blessing and that his assumption was reinforced when his commanding officer gave him special leave to make the trip.

The Army told the Times that an informal review of the matter concluded that the officers involved apparently acted in good faith, believing the CIA had authorized the mission.

It is quite possible that the information that Thompson provided did not reach a high level in the Army or the CIA, but if it didn't, another set of circumstances should have aroused the intelligence agencies' interest in the mission.

On April 26, 1977, then CIA Director Stansfield Turner fired two middle-level CIA employees for providing Wilson with unauthorized assistance in shipping sophisticated explosive devices to Libya. It was only three months later that Thompson was approached about recruiting the Green Beret team. The man who recruited him identified himself as "Patry Loomis" — the name, according to law enforcement sources, of one of the two discharged CIA employees whose identity the CIA has never disclosed.

There are other strange twists to the story. After learning in Libya that his team was to train Libyan commandos, Thompson said he became very concerned and returned to the United States to inform military intelligence officers.

"I know the (CIA) agency does bizarre things, but working for Libyan intelligence was too much," Thompson told the Times.

Nevertheless, when Thompson received requests from Libya for military supplies including training manuals and combat boots, Army authorities instructed him to send them and shortly afterward told him the mission wasn't a CIA operation "after all."

Reports about Wilson's connections with Libya were first published in 1977, about two weeks before Turner fired the two CIA

employees. The Justice Department, however, didn't get Wilson and Terpil indicted until 1980. Both men are fugitives and believed to be in Libya.

While all this was going on, Khadafy's aides were entertaining President Carter's brother, Billy, who had to register as an agent of the Libyan government after receiving a \$220,000 "loan" for future services.

In view of that and ex-CIA agent Wilson selling his intelligence expertise, arms and explosives to Khadafy, the Libyan leader, fanatic despot, bankroller of terrorist plots around the world and implacable adversary of the United States though he is, could have led himself to believe he was softening U.S. opposition to his regime.

The Green Beret mission, the actions of the Army intelligence officers and the question of whether the CIA authorized it, or Wilson and "Loomis" duped Thompson and others into believing that it had the CIA's okay, need to be aired fully.

This is particularly true in the aftermath of the shoot-out over the Gulf of Sidra in which two U.S. Navy fighter planes shot down two Soviet-built Libyan jets after being fired upon.

Implicit in the military actions such as the Navy maneuvers which touched off the incident is that American men are being asked to put their lives on the line. If there has been covert CIA involvement with Khadafy, the pilots who were involved in the shoot-out and the American people have a right to know.

I'll be slow to believe that the CIA had a hand in the Green Beret mission or Wilson's activities, but the record is murky enough to justify action by the Reagan administration to investigate and put its findings on the line. If it doesn't, Congress should, even though it clearly is not in a mood now to make inquiries about cloak-and-dagger operations.